

# Truth, Ethics, and Information

TEXAS Grand Challenges



*Rebecca Taylor is a senior-level technology executive contributing her expertise to the [Good Systems](#) grand challenge at The University of Texas at Austin.*

As an Industry Fellow for the [UT Ethics Project](#), I am grateful that Good Systems, one of the university's three research [grand challenges](#), is addressing the ways that artificial intelligence could be used for beneficial and nefarious purposes. Critical to this is the role of ethics and truth, particularly as they relate to information: from how it's gathered, used, and viewed to the ways it's intentionally *misused*. Much of the struggle over information's authenticity, accuracy, ownership, and control — issues that have inspired some of [Good Systems' projects](#) — comes down to the value we as individual community members place on that information being accurate.

We also live in a time where facts are often in question. Undermining those facts (and the importance placed on them) is a real threat to a functioning democracy. But why does this matter, and to whom?

As a technology industry professional, it's my belief that this industry must remain a trusted provider of capabilities that are life-enhancing, support business competitiveness and otherwise paradigm-shifting. Doing so allows us to attract the best and brightest in order to maintain and continue the significant achievements we've made over the past 40 years. It's also important that a culture is not threatened with damage, disruption and degeneration by virtue of a technology company's choices on how it defines its business models, its product lines, and its governance practices. Finally, it is imperative that we use technology to maximize the best and minimize the negative parts of the human condition. But in order to do this at the same breathtaking rates we have observed over the last several decades, technology companies must act sustainably. And in this case, 'sustainable' refers to ethical practices. These are essential if a business wants to build a trusted and respected brand.

I'll be moderating a SXSW Interactive panel about [technology and the pursuit of truth](#) on March 14, 2020 in Austin. Panelists David McCraw, chief newsroom lawyer and deputy general counsel for The New York Times, will join Vivian Schiller, executive director of Aspen Digital, a program of the Aspen Institute, to dive into what makes a system good from the perspectives of veteran news media experts.

Their combined experience crosses the boundaries of old and new media, technology, and law. During their panel, they'll examine how a democratic society must find real and sustaining solutions to the problem of disinformation, weaponization of toxic speech, and partisan information silos, all without concentrating power in the hands of a few or damaging free expression. McCraw and Schiller will also address how citizens get news given the decline of traditional information vehicles such as newspapers and broadcast news organizations.

Some of the key roles historically provided by news media and other information sources have been undone by the digital transformation: finding consensus, uncovering truth and falsity, setting boundaries on power. To help guide this discussion, I've invited UT [philosophy scholar and Good Systems contributor Paul Woodruff](#) to share his own insights about ethics as they relate to these issues.

Technology can make democracy vibrant, but it can also be a breeding ground for information chaos, abuse of power, and silencing of voices. Which future we get depends on a confluence of law, ethics, and technology. It depends, in fact, on making sure the systems we create are *good*.

*For those near the UT campus on Friday, March 13th who are interested in this topic but might not be attending SXSW, David McCraw will be giving a public talk entitled [Press Freedom in the Age of Alternative Facts](#) from 1:30–2:30 p.m. at the Belo Center for New Media. All are welcome.*

## Please join us on this journey.

[Good Systems](#) is a research grand challenge at The University of Texas at Austin. We're a team of information and computer scientists, robotics experts, engineers, humanists and philosophers, policy and communication scholars, architects, and designers. Our goal over the next eight years is to design AI technologies that benefit society. Follow us on [Twitter](#), join us at our [events](#), and come back to our [blog](#) for updates.

[Rebecca \(Becky\) Taylor](#) is a senior-level technology executive with 35 years' experience inventing new technologies, forming startups, building committed teams, and raising funds. She's currently a UT Ethics Project Industry Fellow, and in 2009, she served as one of the university's first Entrepreneurs-in-Residence. Taylor has led advanced development and strategy efforts at organizations from small start-ups to multinationals and has held senior advisory roles at the U.S. Department of State. She's a senior member of the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) and holds a BS in computer science from Iowa State University and a Master of Public Affairs from UT's LBJ School of Public Policy.